

Popular Culture and Philosophy

# iPod and Philosophy

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*iCon of an ePoch*

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## Don't Talk to Me

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The iPod mobile digital device is one of the pernicious developments of recent technological innovation. It, even more than electronic gaming, has fostered what seems to be the ideal environment for the social solipsist. Electronic gaming, once the scourge of mothers and fathers trying to communicate with their kids, has now evolved into a social phenomenon, where groups participate. But iPod owners revel in the splendid isolation provided by a hand-size player and a couple of earphones.

One of the more joyful sounds is that of people engaged in conversation. Talking to one another is the most exhilarating form of human activity. The lilt, the accents, the rhythms, the modulation of sound is more complex and more rewarding than even, for example, a Mahler symphony. The sound of the human voice is a joy and it brings joy. The iPod, however, has managed to do what even Big Brother could not: silence that voice. Worse, it has turned iPod users into antisocial beings, those who avoid human interaction. The spontaneity of the social has disappeared and the silence of the anthropoid now rules.

Lest you think I exaggerate, take a look around you. The subways are silent. In a recent issue of *Wired*, a reader wrote to ask if it was okay to tap another subway-rider on the shoulder whose iPod volume was turned up so high he (the iPodder) couldn't hear his cell phone ringing.<sup>1</sup> It used to be the case that the most vibrant

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan I. Koerner, "Earth to Rocker: Reality Calling," in *Wired* (March 2008) p. 50.

place in our department was the end of the hall where the graduate student offices are. If you got bored with what you were doing and wanted to liven up a bit, you would wander down there and you could always find a good, loud, animated philosophical argument in progress. Today, there are few sounds down there, only drones sitting at their desks plugged in and staring vacantly. If you interrupt one of those reveries, you are met with surly stares and impatience.

Walking down the sidewalk on a college campus you used to hear students greeting one another, yelling to friends, arguing, making plans for the evening. Now: silence, walking slumped over, staring at the ground, plugged in. iPod users avoid eye-contact. They don't want to engage in conversation. They want to listen to their music. Their entire body language signals avoidance of human interaction.

Consider the following situation. We all love to go to the beach. There's something primordial about the pull of the ocean. Then there are the sounds of the waves, the birds, children laughing and parents yelling at them to be careful. But the beaches have been invaded by the brainsnatched; the iPodders. They walk the beach heads down, listening, not to the sounds around them, but to their music. Why go to the beach if you are going to avoid everything that's there? An early morning stroll amid the sounds of gulls and pelicans calling, with the waves lapping at your feet is one of the more relaxing things to do. What makes it relaxing are the sounds, the ambience of the waterfront, the feel of the sand between your toes. But can you have that experience when you're plugged in? I doubt if you even feel the sand.

So what's so wrong about all this? It might be argued that it is I who has missed the boat. What the iPod does, it will be argued, is provide people the opportunity to disengage from the roar of contemporary living, to collect their thoughts and even to meditate. There is, it is said, simply too much noise in the world today, and the iPod provides a means for limiting the impact of that noise on our fractured and stressed being. It helps create a haven wherever we are and for the most part in whatever we are doing. What is wrong with that?

Well, nothing, as such. That is, there is nothing *wrong* with it. The iPod itself is a piece of technology. As a piece of technology, it's neither right nor wrong, good nor bad. In another place, I argued that it is the use to which individual technologies are put

that gives us the context in which to say a technology is good or bad.<sup>2</sup> Here, I would like to extend that somewhat and argue that it's not just the use to which a technology is put that allows us to make value judgments regarding it, but the consequences of its use as well. It's the consequences of using the iPod as an escape mechanism that are so bad.

In *Brave New World*, Aldous Huxley offered us *soma* to achieve the desired state of bliss and state control. Who would have thought that the contemporary version of an imagined science fiction drug would arrive in form of a music player? But it has. The iPod is our form of *soma*. And the reason it's so successful is that each one is individually programmed by its owner. We, or should I say, Apple, has found the way to achieve the perfect isolated state of bliss by having iPodders program their own version of musical heaven. No need to worry if this or that version will fit all. Furthermore, the iPod has overreached even Linus's blanket as the ultimate comfort giver. We now have iPod stations and special speakers so that when you unplug you can keep the music going. But what happens when two people who share an abode each have an iPod? Do they usually share the station, or does each have his or her own and do we then have iPod station wars? I doubt it, since the whole point of an iPod is to avoid the social and conflict is social—my guess is that in most households one or the other will simply plug back in and avoid conflict.

So now we have come to the set of iPod consequences that are most pernicious. As I just mentioned, the iPod is an antisocial tool. By that I mean that the consequences of using iPods to create your own haven, into which you can retreat and ignore the world around you, are dangerous. The ubiquitous use of the iPod may be one of the final nails in the coffin of social skills.

So what's the big deal, what's so important about social skills? Social skills are the means one has to interact with others in a productive fashion. The ability to interact with others in a productive fashion is the key to technological innovation and to a successful democratic government.

Technological innovation in our high-tech world is a product of lots of brainstorming, group projects, feedback loops and team

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<sup>2</sup> *Thinking about Technology* (New York: Seven Bridges Press, 2000), and available at <http://www.phil.vt.edu/HTML/people/pittjoseph.htm>.

building. Even Steve Jobs had a co-inventor working with him. Technological innovation is not the product today of single individuals working alone in backrooms. It's the result of ideas being tossed around by people willing to try something new, something they may not have invented, and work with it and others to improve, modify, and convince others to build and market the gadget. Good ideas do not speak for themselves. They need advocates, and they need advocates at all levels of their development, from the first glimmer of a thought to the polished thing in front of you. The ability to articulate your ideas and to be an advocate for them also calls for different types of skills. Articulating your ideas requires that you have the ability to express clearly your thoughts using readily understood means such as clear language, obvious diagrams and useful metaphors.

Being an advocate for those ideas requires all of the above and more. The 'more' is the ability to successfully interact with others—to know how to read body language, the ability to present yourself as open and approachable. To develop those skills requires experience and lots of work. These skills will not come to you when you are slouched over a desk, lost in the world of your iPod.

What worries me about the lack of argument in the graduate student offices is that it is during those informal discussions that philosophy students develop their skills at argumentation—skills that require more than rigorous logic; skills that require command of rhetorical strategies and knowledge of how to make eye contact and good use of body language. These students may know the details of Kant's transcendental arguments, but if they can't defend their interpretation in person, on the hoof, then their futures as successful philosophers will be severely limited. Likewise their futures as teachers and, more importantly, as productive members of society at large.

Good teachers must be able to interact with their students in ways that draw students into the discussion and help them expand their own skills. You might object that to be a philosopher you don't have to be a teacher. Okay, then—except for the very rare individual like Martin Luther King or Ghandi, the real philosophers of the twentieth century—philosophers are professors. How are you as a professional philosopher with a Ph.D. going to make a living? There are no more patrons today.

Now, this argument does not apply only to philosophers. There

are so few jobs available today that don't require social skills that anything that impedes their development ought to be carefully scrutinized.

Above, it was also claimed that social skills are necessary for one to be a productive *member* of society. I would like to take this one step further. Social skills are necessary for there to be a productive *society*. Today we are experiencing an America in which social skills apparently are not deemed important. How can it be that we tolerate the rantings of radio shock jocks and TV talk-shows in which interlocutors scream at each other and show no sign of courtesy and respect? A society in which intolerance for the differing views of others and a fundamental lack of respect for the other is considered entertainment is a society in which the value of social skills has been lost. The ability to interact with others in a respectful and productive fashion is essential for a democracy to function. If we no longer think democracy is a good thing, then why not scream at someone you disagree with instead of entering into a civil discussion? Why not stick your earplugs in and tune out the world when talking to people becomes such a burden? Why not tell everyone else "Don't talk to me, I'm listening to MY music!"?